



**THE
ART
OF
SONGWRITING**

**HOW TO CREATE, THINK AND LIVE
LIKE A SONGWRITER**



ED BELL

Hey there,

Welcome to *The Art of Songwriting*. Well not quite all of *The Art of Songwriting*, just this preview version I put together so you can get an idea of what the complete *The Art of Songwriting* looks like.

As you probably guessed, *The Art of Songwriting* is a book about songwriting. But it's not just any book about songwriting. Most books about songwriting focus on the craft of songwriting or theories of songwriting or just the songwriting industry – but this book is different. It's about the art of what we do. It's about how there are lots of different parts to being an artist and how you can get really good at all of them.

The fun thing about this preview eBook is that it's here for you to try on for size, to see whether you think you'll enjoy the full book or not. And unlike most eBooks, you can do pretty much what you want with it: you can copy it as much as you want, you can print it out, you can even email it to all of your friends who you think might enjoy it.

So here it is. You've got the book's contents page, introduction and then Chapters 1, 5 and 9, plus a couple of extra bits for good measure.

And if you decide you want a copy of the complete version of *The Art of Songwriting*, you can get it at **thesongfoundry.com** or at any good bookshop.

Ed

THE ART OF SONGWRITING

How to Create, Think and Live
Like a Songwriter

ED BELL



WHY THERE ARE NO REVIEWS ON THIS PAGE

**If you think I'm going to quote anyone's review here
you've missed the entire point of this book.**

Seriously – read it yourself.

Form your own opinion.

I dare you.

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(Most of the chapters don't have page numbers because they're only in the full book.)

INTRODUCTION: WHAT THE \$&%! IS THIS BOOK?

You've picked up this book. So you probably have some reasonable questions: What the \$&%! is it? Who the &€#! wrote it? And why the \$&#?%£! is it time for a new book on songwriting anyway?

Let's start in the middle, like *Star Wars*.

Hi. I'm Ed. I'm a musician and writer. I write a lot of music for theatre these days, but along the way I've written everything from straight-up pop music to rap music to avant-garde classical music where you had to climb inside the piano and hit the strings with a coin.

I'm also the kind of person who loves to figure out how stuff works. Ideally, I love to figure out that sort of stuff first-hand. And I love figuring that sort of stuff out because I love to use what I've learnt to create new stuff.

And one of the most important things I learnt from all of this figuring out is that creating different kinds of music isn't as different as you might think.

Sure, different types of music sound different. That's a no-brainer. You can write a song at the piano or you can write a song with a guitar or you can write a song on a laptop and never let it see a real-life instrument. They're all great ways to write a song and they'll all create something that sounds different. But while doing my fair share of creating different things, I started to realize that the big ideas you think

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about when you write a new song are more or less universal, whatever you happen to be working on.

It's kind of like building a house: whether you decide to paint the outside red or green or purple, you still have to think about the same sort of things to build a house that isn't going to fall down. And best of all, you don't necessarily have to learn all of that from building houses. You could learn it from building bridges or office blocks or replica medieval fortresses. Sure, whether you end up building in steel, brick or stone is going to affect what you think about. But underneath that you're going to be relying on some pretty much universal principles of construction to guide you.

And likewise, whatever kind of songs you're trying to create, whatever styles you want to work in – and whatever you learned already to get you here – lots of what you do as a songwriter comes down to a few key ideas.

Realizing that is kind of central to who I am, and looking at those key ideas is a big part of what the \$&%! this book is.

We'll talk about the other parts later, but to get there we're going to have to look at why it's time for a new book on songwriting.

One of the other important things I learnt from doing lots of figuring out is that being good at figuring out is an important skill in itself. Sure, education is great. It's great to go to college or join a writing group or find a great mentor. Other people know things that you don't yet and it pays to find out what some of those things are. But as an artist, there are also things other people can't teach you. There are some things you can only figure out for yourself first-hand. And more often than not, it's this hard-won wisdom that makes all the difference in the end.

The thing is, as an artist you kind of have to be unique. There's no point being a carbon copy of something (or someone) that already exists. That means you have to carve out your own path, which also means nobody on this or any other planet can give you everything you're going to need to know. They don't – and can't – know it any better than you do.

So guess what? That means this one's on you.

That is, your job as an artist isn't to find yourself, whatever that means. It's to create yourself. You get to create yourself as the kind of artist and kind of person you want to be. You get to learn from and be influenced by people who know things you don't, but ultimately it's up to you to put all the pieces together in the way you decide to put them together. And, all things considered, that's your biggest and most important challenge.

It's also your toughest challenge. Not just because it's hard work. But because it's always a big leap into the unknown.

You might know this great line by Leonard Cohen: "Being a songwriter is like being a nun: you're married to a mystery."

And it's true: being a songwriter involves faith, dedication and absolutely no sex.

OK, one of those things isn't true. But there are lots of ways songwriting is just like religion. They're both puzzles you have to unpack in your own way. You get to practice both things by deciding what you believe and what it means to you and that's that. You get to decide whether you believe in God or Brahma or Cthulhu or ManBearPig or none or all of the above. There's no right or wrong. In a sense, what you believe doesn't matter anyway. What matters is that believing it makes your life better.

And that's key. If you've set your sights on a particular goal there are no right or wrong ways to get there. There are only things you can believe that are more helpful than others at getting you there. If you want to be an Olympic high jumper but you believe training is a waste of time and you'll just wing it on the day, it's probably not going to work out well for you. You've chosen a shitty belief that's not really compatible with your goal and as a result you're going to have a shitty time.

So although as a songwriter there isn't much that's definitively right or wrong, that doesn't mean it's a free-for-all. Like being a nun, there's a bit more to it than eat, sleep, pray and hope for the best.

On the one hand there are craft principles you have to learn: fundamental and mostly definitive ideas that are to do with how words and music work. Mastering

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these principles means picking up a ton of very literal skills you'll use to do your job properly.

And on the other hand there are more subjective beliefs you have to figure out: beliefs about who you want to be as an artist and the kind of art you want to make. These beliefs are definitely not definitive, but the way you start making your mind up about these things *is* pretty fundamental. There are things you can think about to help you get there, and that's what the hazier skill of creating yourself is all about.

But for some reason, it's a skill people don't talk about very much.

So I wanted to give it a try. I wanted to create a songwriting book that doesn't just talk about the craft of how songs are made, but also about the fuzzier, more mysterious – but just as important – parts of what it means to be an artist.

In fact, what most songwriting books won't tell you is that success as a songwriter – however you define it – is as much about how you live your life and the way you see the world as it is about your skill with words and music.

Maybe just let that sink in for a moment. It's a really important idea.

The key to creating like a songwriter is to think like a songwriter. Because action follows thought. But the key to thinking like a songwriter is to *be* a songwriter – to live your life like a songwriter, to see the world as a songwriter. Because thinking like a songwriter isn't just something you switch on when you sit down to write. It's part of who you are and how you think day in, day out.

In other words, you have to live creatively if you want to think creatively if you want to create creatively.

And in short, that's why it's time for a new book on songwriting. It's time to talk about songwriting from a new perspective. It's time to do justice to all of these important ideas that work together to make you a songwriter, not just the craft ideas that get talked about a lot. It's time to talk about the art – not just the craft – of songwriting.

So if this book is about big, universal ideas, that means it's supposed to be useful to you whatever kind of music you make. It's not a book about writing rock

songs or gospel songs or rap songs. It's just a book about writing songs, and it's up to you to see how these ideas apply specifically to the music you want to make.

Because here's the thing: you probably have access to the best and most perfectly suited songwriting teachers you could ever want already – even if you've never met them. You're probably learning from them already. You're probably listening to their music. You're probably reading about them and watching them on TV and thinking about how they do what they do.

Everything you've ever wanted to know about songwriting is buried in the way these people live and think and create. The trick, of course, is knowing where to look – and, more importantly, what to look for.

And that's a pretty neat segue into what the \$&%! this book is.

This book is a lens, a way of looking at songwriting, to make you the best self-teacher you could possibly be. It's here to make you better at thinking for yourself, solving your own problems and making things that no one's ever made before. It's here to challenge you to be the best version of the artist you are already.

This book is a way of talking about the fundamental principles of songwriting so that pretty much anyone – yes, anyone – can pick up the tools they'll need to go forth and make some really cool stuff.

And because this book is about the broader picture of what it means to be an artist, that's going to affect the way we look at these fundamental ideas. In at least three important ways.

Firstly, the focus of this book is more about asking you questions than giving you answers. If there are really no right answers – only your right answers – the worst thing I could do is try to give you some. Instead, we're going to talk a lot about how you come up with the answers yourself. We're going to talk about the kind of questions that can help you do that.

Secondly, it means it's not an academic book or a school book. It's not a book about analyzing songs and songwriting just for the hell of it. Sure, we are going to look back at what's been done, and we are going to take apart existing songs to see

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how they work, but we're going to look at those things only so that you can use them to make something new. It's one thing to explain how a jumbo jet flies. It's a totally different thing to explain how you design a new one.

Thirdly, I've tried to keep the ideas in this book simple. Partly because less is more, but also because these ideas *are* pretty simple. Like most things, songwriting's big ideas aren't that complicated, it's just using them that sometimes gets complicated. I'm going to use this book to tell you where to aim but then leave target practice up to you.

In fact, with creative things it's often better not to go into too much detail. Trying to juggle too many concepts at once can end up closing your mind more than opening it. You can get so comfortable overthinking that you end up doing more thinking than doing. So I'd much rather give you a few key concepts and let you take it from there. Sure, that means you'll make wrong turns and even big mistakes from time to time. But that's all good. Big mistakes usually contain the best lessons.

So there we go. That's what the \$&%! this book is. We're almost at the point I can stop telling you about it and just let you enjoy it, but first let's get some basic housekeeping out of the way.

One: this book has fifteen chapters. They start with some general, big picture ideas, before focusing on more detailed, technical ideas, before zooming out for some big picture ideas again. It's your book so you get to do what you like with it, but the chapters often build on ideas I've talked about earlier, so I recommend you read them in order. Along the same lines, even if you write just music or just lyrics I recommend you don't skip anything. Whatever part of a song you contribute, it's still your job to understand how everything fits together, so you're not doing yourself any favors if you skip anything. (Plus, I saved some of the best jokes for these chapters. So there's that too.)

Two: it's not often I get super technical about how music is made, but when we do talk music I'm going to assume you have a basic knowledge of music theory. If not, that's OK, but it's worth finding a class or an online course or some other kind of

magic learning device to help you pick up some of those skills – and not just for the sake of getting the most out of this book. (And yes, that applies to you too, lyrics-only writers.)

Three: I've been pretty selective about the detailed examples I put in the book, and whenever I've chosen them I've picked mostly older, well-known examples. I've done that because there's a good chance you'll know the songs I talk about already (and if not, you can easily get hold of them), though that doesn't mean you have to or ought to write exactly like them. But even more importantly, I've kept my examples pretty mainstream so that you can apply what I talk about to your own examples: to the music you love and want to learn from. That's an essential part of how this book works.

Four: unlike many similar books, there are no exercises at the ends of each chapter. That doesn't mean there are no conceivable exercises you could do after reading each chapter, it just means you should make your own up. You should take the ideas in this book and try them out in your own way or just try to use them in your next song. You'll have more fun and learn a lot more that way, I promise.

Five: there is some swearing in this book. You know that by now. If that offends you, I guess I could mention that people who swear are usually seen as more genuine and trustworthy. (Seriously, some scientists proved it.) I guess I could mention that if you want to be an artist you'll have to get used to being around people who swear, even if you don't yourself. But I'll just say sometimes you need those kinds of words to say what you need to say in the authentic and persuasive way you want to say it. *C'est la vie, mes amis.*

OK, that's our housekeeping over.

At this point it's traditional to say how fun writing this book was. And yes, it was a thrill. It was also frustrating, exhausting and occasionally mind-bending. It took way longer than I expected and there were plenty of times I had no idea if what I was writing was any good – as it is creating anything worthwhile.

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But more importantly, writing this book was also really rewarding. It's not every day you get to make something that helps other people make something too. The best kind of thing to make.

So, *voilà*. Happy reading and – most of all – happy writing.

New York City

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IN BRIEF

As far as I'm concerned, all songwriting – all most things, actually – comes down to three simple, eternal principles:

Know your shit

Find out by trying

Be yourself

Know your shit means understanding how things work, what's already been done and how you might use it in future. It means doing your homework.

It means ignorance is definitely not a virtue.

Find out by trying means knowing your shit won't give you all the answers.

It means the only way to know something works is to keep trying different versions of it until it does.

Be yourself means understanding that knowing things and being good at using them is only half the picture. You have to be you too. You have to give

us something that you and only you can give us. You have to give us something that's not just well-made, but different-made too.

Every idea in this book expands on one or more of these basic principles.

I'll leave it to you to figure out which is which.

[1]

THERE ARE NO RULES

“Some people wish above all to conform to the rules, I wish only to render
what I can hear.”

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

“If I’d followed all the rules, I’d never have gotten anywhere.”

MARILYN MONROE

‘Rules are for fools.’

‘There are no rules, only tools.’

‘Make a rule to break a rule.’

Let’s take two lessons from the book of life, chapter one. One: people bloody love a rhymed one-liner. Two: in life and in art, there are no rules.

Most things in life – at least, the most interesting things in life – aren’t governed by rules. Whatever people tell you.

That doesn’t mean life is a mess, nobody knows anything and nothing ever makes sense. It just means that seeing the world in black and white won’t do you any favors. It means that no rule exists without plenty of exceptions and caveats. But

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mostly it means that spending your life doing something because it's 'correct' and not doing some other thing because it's a 'mistake' isn't going to work out well for you in the long run. Especially if you want to be an artist.

Instead, as artists, it's much better to play with choices and results. That distinction is subtle but powerful, so let's talk about it.

If you're an artist, it's not so much that there's a rule that says 'Don't take a nap on the highway'. If you really want to, sure, go ahead. But anyone who's thought about it for even a second knows that if you do, the chances you won't live to tell the tale are pretty high. So you'll probably decide it isn't a good idea most of the time.

In the same way, there isn't really a rule that says 'Respect other people'. If you don't want to do it, be my guest. But anyone who's thought about it for even a second knows that if you're always mean to other people, the chances are pretty high that you'll have no friends, nobody to write songs with and nobody to pick you up when you're feeling down. So – assuming those things are important to you – it's probably your loss in the long run.

This is how life works. We make choices. And as long as you're prepared to accept the results, you get to make whatever choices you think best.

But where life gets really interesting is that you don't always know how a choice is going to turn out. Sometimes you're faced with lots of options – even lots of great ones – and it's not easy to decide which one to pick. Probably whatever you choose there will be some good consequences plus a couple of not-so-good ones too. It's rarely perfect or easy. You just have to use your best judgment, make your choice and accept what happens.

That's where experience comes in. All 'being experienced' means is that you've done something enough times you develop a really solid sense of how your choices might turn out. (We'll talk more about this in Chapter 2.) The more opportunities you get to make choices and see what the results are, the better you get at making similar choices in future.

Songwriting works just like this too. There are no rules. There is nothing that says ‘You absolutely must do this, ideally while you also do that, and Jesus H. Christ you absolutely mustn’t do that.’ No. You get to call the shots. You get to make your own choices. You get to take a chance on all kinds of things you’re not completely sure about, knowing you’ll never be completely sure about them.

You’ll never be completely sure about what you’re making because whenever you create something new you’re always heading into uncharted territory. No matter how much experience you have you’re always figuring plenty of things out from scratch. You’ve never made this particular thing before so you can’t know everything about it. You just have to keep at it while you figure things out by trial and error. (Mostly error, incidentally.)

Of course, there’s an art to doing this well. In songwriting, like in life, you might never be able to predict any results with 100% accuracy, but you can still try. In fact, it’s good to try.

You do that by picking up a set of tools to guide you. These tools are called principles. They’re tried-and-tested ideas that say ‘If you do this, this is probably the result’. You learn these principles because they’re really valuable if you want to write clear and smart and interesting songs. You just have to remember they don’t *make* you write clear and smart and interesting songs.

You understand the craft of the art form you want to work in because it helps make sure that what you create is well made. You wouldn’t buy a table that isn’t level because the legs are all different lengths. You’d insist the person who made it figured out some basic carpentry skills first. And that’s the beauty of good craft: it makes sure what you’re trying to make works on a fundamental level, so we can concentrate on what the thing is supposed to do or say in the first place.

But craft principles backfire when they become rules – when people want to see making art in black and white, or when people turn to craft to give them solid answers. Because craft principles are only supposed to give you questions – they’re only supposed to guide you, that’s all. Worst of all, rules backfire because they stop

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you experimenting. Principles remind you that experimenting is the only way forward.

The trouble is, rules are easier to understand. They're simple, comfortable and reassuring. 'Do this' is easy to follow because it doesn't leave any room for doubt. So people like to create and follow rules as a kind of shortcut to understanding things in a more subtle, nuanced way. People sell you books, courses and websites full of rules because they think turning everything into a few easy-to-follow steps is somehow doing you a favor.

But this comes at a price because all rules miss the point in one way or another. They describe the world as a perfect, predictable and totally understandable place. And anything that does that is a big fat lie. A dangerous, misleading, close-but-no-cigar lie. The world isn't always predictable and perfect: it's beautiful and messy and that's what makes it so interesting. Our most important task as artists is learning to deal with that, not following hard-and-fast rules because we're afraid of dealing with that.

But luckily, that task is pretty straightforward.

You learn and understand the so-called rules so you have them at your fingertips. They're the tools you'll need to make whatever you're trying to make. But once you understand the rules, it becomes your privilege – your duty – to decide when to use them, when to twist or distort them, and when to ignore them altogether. You get to take their advice but not be a slave to them. You get to decide when what you're making is best served by the so-called rules and when it definitely isn't.

In a nutshell: we make our own rules.

We use the so-called rules to draw our own conclusions. We make case-by-case decisions based on what we know about songwriting already. Sometimes we have to look at the ideas *behind* the so-called rules and draw our conclusions from there. But mostly we do this neat juggling act of understanding what's been done in our art form before we got here, while somehow using all of that to create something that's never existed before.

In a tinier, tidier nutshell: we learn to think for ourselves.

We make our own rules by thinking for ourselves.

It's not possible to be an artist unless you learn to think for yourself. It's not possible to be an artist unless you develop a healthy disregard for rules, tradition and authority. It's not possible to create something interesting, individual and remarkable unless you decide to care about something more important than playing by the rules.

And this is something you develop bit by bit, by the way. The more you question what you're told – the more you consider whether what you're told corresponds to the reality in front of you – the more independent you become. The more independent you become, the more confident being independent you become – and that's what really matters.

“A lot of people never use their initiative because no one told them to.”

BANKSY

So, in case you were wondering, this isn't going to be a book of rules. If you were looking for a book of rules – if you wanted a book that makes everything formulaic and really easy for you – you're going to be really disappointed. (With life, as well as this book.)

Instead, this is going to be a book of principles, ideas and tools.

There are no hard-and-fast rules in this book just like there are no hard-and-fast rules in life. And as with all principles, ideas and tools, it's your job to use the ones that are useful to you and mercilessly discard the rest.

It's that simple.

And here's a personal tip: if thinking for yourself means you discard half of what I've written, I won't even mind.

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In fact, I'll be proud of you.

FUNDAMENTAL SONGWRITING CHALLENGE #1

Get to know the principles that tend to make great songs.

Then do whatever the \$&%! you like with them.

[5]

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Here's something fun to know about how creativity works: we don't really know how creativity works.

How exciting is that? How inspiring is that? Your brain can come up with things that have never existed before and nobody can completely explain how it does it. Somehow, it just does. Somehow, it can take in everything it's ever learnt or experienced and turn all of that into something new.

Creating something original is always going to take you somewhere unexpected. By definition. So that also means that the process that's going to take you there is going to be unpredictable, and that's totally the point.

But if you can't always plan where your creative brain will take you, you can learn to tweak and streamline your process to help your brain work at its best. And that makes sense: if your pencil factory keeps churning out broken pencils, you don't blame the pencils. You figure out what you can fine-tune on the factory floor. You improve the process to improve the things that the process creates.

That's what this chapter is about.

CREATIVITY IS DISCOVERY

Don't take this personally, but your next song isn't just about you. You might be the person who creates it, puts their name on it and says cool and intriguing things about it in a *Rolling Stone* interview. But slow down, punk, this is about your song too. From time to time your song is going to tell you what it wants and needs. It's your job to shut up and listen out for that.

The thing is, a work of art is its own kind of living organism. And like any living, breathing, functioning thing, the parts all have to be in their proper places for the whole thing to work properly. You could go all Dr Frankenstein and swap a person's brain and kidneys around, and as interesting an experiment as it might be, you'd quickly realize that a human body doesn't really work if you do that.

Songwriting works the same way. Sure, it's a creative act. But a creative act is also an act of discovery. You decide to write an uplifting ballad, so that affects the tempo or title you choose. You decide to make the first chord C major, so that affects what you choose for the second chord. You're making some choices and trying to discover what other choices go well with them. That's why there are no right and wrong creative choices – only choices that work well together.

Some people describe this process as pulling a song out of the air or out of the ether. It's as if the song already exists, you're just trying to uncover it. It's as if the statue is already in the block of marble, you just have to dig it out.

The big decision – the part where you're 100% holding the reins – is when you decide what your song is or is about. What you might call the big vision. After that, you're trying to figure out the clearest or most interesting or most personal way of realizing that vision. And that's a process of trial and error, a process of discovery.

Yes, this might sound scary. It might sound like you're letting go of control exactly when you should be doing the opposite. But once you embrace this, you might be surprised by how liberating it is. Seriously, try it sometime. You'll become a medium or channel instead of a dictator. You'll stop trying to micro-manage every

part of what you create and you'll let what you're creating lead you on a crazy adventure. Trust me, it's a lot more fun that way.

DISCOVERY MEANS DRAFTING

A big part of the process of discovery is discovering things that *don't* work. Because discovering things that don't work is a one of the best ways to discover the things that do.

That's just how it is. In life and art you have to make a lot of wrong turns before you can start making the right ones. In songwriting you usually have to write the half-assed version of something before you can write the fully-assed version. Sometimes it takes five, ten or twenty slightly different but still half-assed versions of a line or melody before you come up with one you really like. Sometimes it takes even more.

As they say: great songs aren't written, they're rewritten.

In fact, the more a work of art looks like it came out perfectly formed in some giant explosion of perfect inspiration, usually the more blood, sweat and tears that went into making it look that way. Plenty of great works of art weren't that great at some point in their creation – google 'dodgy early demos of classic songs' and you'll see what I mean.

Sure, it's easy and tempting to assume that great artists are just better at coming up with great ideas than everyone else, but it's just not true.

As any great artist will tell you, they come up with plenty of terrible ideas too. The only difference is that great artists have learned to be pickier. They don't settle for OK. They come up with as many ideas as they can and only roll with the best ones, or they just keep refining and improving the OK ideas until they become the best ones.

CREATIVITY IS INTUITIVE

One of the best things about creativity is that it's not always logical. Sometimes you come across a great work of art but you can't really explain why it's so great. It just works. Every part of it just somehow works together.

Part of the trick of drafting is sifting through all of the ideas in front of you and figuring out what to do with them. And often you'll start to see how some of this material might work well together. It's like a sports team line up where some of the ideas are whispering 'pick me, pick me!' just a bit louder than the others. Bit by bit, all of these ideas start to coalesce into a single whole.

But here's the weirdest thing: often you won't know why. You won't necessarily understand why one idea seems to go with some other idea. Sometimes as you revise something you'll find better and better ways to put two ideas together. You might not understand why one way is better than the other. But somehow you just know it's what your song needs. OK, you might look back in a year and it'll be obvious why you did it. But while you're in there creating, don't be surprised if sometimes you're riding on your intuition and not much else.

When it comes to making creative decisions, your gut knows things your rational brain can't put into words. You have to learn to trust that.

NO IDEAS ARE NEW

Your brain churns out new ideas, and you turn those new ideas into songs. But have you ever wondered where those ideas come from?

It turns out the answer is really simple and really interesting: new ideas are made of old ideas. New ideas are just old ideas dressed up differently or mixed up in new ways.

That means, in a sense, there are no new ideas. It means, in a sense, all art is made by stealing ideas from other art. As T. S. Eliot said, "Immature poets imitate;

mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different.”

This is exciting because it doesn't just give you permission to steal liberally from the art and artists you love, it means stealing from the art and artists you love is the only way to create something new. It means you have to drown in the ocean of influence before you can come up to the surface with something new and exciting.

But let's be clear, creativity isn't plagiarism. Creative theft doesn't mean copying someone else word for word or note for note. Sure, you can steal whatever you like, but you have to give as much as you take. You have to do something new with the things you steal. You have to take parts of some random thing you love and mix them together with parts of other random things you love. And that's called being original. That's called making something new.

“I wanted to hear music that had not yet happened, by putting together things that suggested a new thing which did not yet exist.”

BRIAN ENO

Every artist wants to create something new. There's not much point in being an artist if you don't. But no one is going to reinvent their art form overnight. You have to be influenced. You have to take other people's ideas and do other things with them. You have to work with what's already out there and nudge it somewhere just new enough that it becomes original.

One way or another, everything you write is a love letter to the art you admire. And that's how it should be.

FIND A PROCESS THAT WORKS FOR YOU

Oh, and if you were wondering, there is no 'The Creative Process' or 'The Writing Process'. There's no single universal way everybody who makes new things has to do it. It's up to you to try things out and see what works well for you.

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Maybe you usually start a song by working out the melody. Maybe you usually start by brainstorming lyric ideas on a blank page. Maybe you work best in two-hour chunks with strict fifteen-minute breaks. Maybe you create best with your laptop in a noisy café, or maybe you need your quiet space at home. Maybe you work best sketching out ideas by hand before you tidy things up on a screen somewhere. Maybe you need half an hour tidying your workspace, ironing your bed sheets or vacuuming the shower before your brain is settled enough to start creating properly. (Don't knock procrastination, by the way – it's where I get some of my best thinking done.)

But most of all: be ready to let your creative process take you somewhere new every time. However you do it, a work of art is created bit by bit and piece by piece. A work of art is hundreds or thousands of individual decisions that somehow all add up to one bigger thing. There are billions of different ways to end up with that one bigger thing.

And that, by the way, is the main reason I don't believe in writers' block. Sure, sometimes you sit down to write and it gushes forth like the Amazon. Sometimes it trickles out more like a leaky water bottle you bought on Amazon. But a trickle isn't a block. And, more importantly, that trickle might turn into a gush if you try a different route. You might not be able to write the chorus yet, but you might be able to write the first verse. Or you might be able to write the chorus if you go back a step and figure out some of the big picture questions we talked about in Chapter 4. Or riff on some chords the chorus might use. Or just try write a crappy chorus you know you'll improve later. Writer's block usually only exists because you aren't ready to create something you've told yourself you should be.

If something feels like a step forward, no matter how small, let it happen. Don't be afraid of trying new ways to get where you're trying to go. Don't feel discouraged if an idea doesn't come easily the first time you ask it to. Creativity doesn't always do what you ask it to. That's what makes it so exciting.

HOW TO BE INTERESTING

If creativity is about putting existing things together in new ways, creating something new is the art of putting things that don't usually go together together.

In fact, the more interesting and extraordinary the combination of things you put together, the more interesting and extraordinary the result overall.

Any old anyone can combine existing things in tried-and-tested ways. Any old anyone can use the same three chords that everyone uses, the same old lyrical clichés and all the obvious and predictable ways to say 'I love you'. But not everyone is bold and interesting enough to try new sounds, find an original way of saying something or just take a familiar idea and give it a twist nobody has before.

Which kind of person do you want to be?

And yes, doing something untested might make you feel nervous. You're taking a chance on something new and it might feel weird because you have no idea where you're heading. But you have to get used to that. You have to get used to going on bold and unexpected journeys, because once you do, there's every chance other people will want to come along with you. But only if you decide to go somewhere we can't go already.

Some great ideas sound really terrible at first. Who wants to listen to a six-minute opera-meets-pop song that nobody's really sure what it's about? Plenty of people, as it turned out. People love 'Bohemian Rhapsody' precisely because it's different. OK, you couldn't put out an album of twelve Bohemian Rhapsodies because then each track wouldn't be that different and wouldn't be that interesting. But every once in a while pursuing an idea that excites you but seems random, weird or stupid at first is a great way of creating something really original.

CREATIVITY TAKES COURAGE

It takes courage to take big risks on bold ideas. It takes courage to keep going when you have no idea how things might turn out. It takes courage to keep figuring things

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out as you go along. That's what makes being creative so challenging. But it's also what makes being creative so exciting.

It can be scary to take big risks. But if you want to be really good at making exciting, new things, you don't have much choice. Taking a big risk might mean you end up with something terrible, but as it turns out, taking a big risk is the only way to end up with something really great. Incredible, unexpected and life-changing things only come from risky places.

Of course, you can always play it safe. You can always shoot for a four, five or six out of ten. Though then you've kind of lost by default. But otherwise, if you want to risk making something that's a seven, you have to take a chance it'll end up a three. If you want an eight, you have to take a chance it'll end up a two. And if you want to blow us away with a nine or ten, well, you get the idea.

But here's the other thing: the best part about taking risks is that every time you risk something, you're rewarded. Maybe not in the way you expected, maybe not in any way you could have imagined. But every risk is rewarded all the same – maybe with new knowledge, new experience, new confidence, or something else entirely. Try it and see.

Being creative means adjusting your definition of success to include trying hard and taking risks, whatever the result. It means accepting risk as a necessary part of trying to do new and exciting things. It means understanding that taking risks doesn't always work out in the short term, but as a long-game strategy it's one of the most powerful tools you've got.

The good news is finding the courage to do that is pretty simple. Courage is just like a muscle: the more you use it the more it grows. You've just got to keep chipping away at your comfort zone and training yourself to be more comfortable being uncomfortable. You've just got to learn to feel the fear but decide to push ahead anyway.

In other words, it's not that the challenge gets any less challenging. It's just that you get better at rising to it.

FUNDAMENTAL SONGWRITING CHALLENGE #5

Prime your creative brain to let it make magic at its best.

[9]

LYRIC ESSENTIALS

If you want to paint landscapes, you get to know what you can do with watercolors. If you want to make pots, you get to know how clay works. If you want to design shoes, you get to know what you can do with leather, rubber and canvas. Whatever you want to create, you get to know how what it's made of works.

As a songwriter, you've got words – and the ideas they express – to play with. And unlike with music, there are some pretty universal principles that make most types of lyrics work well. These principles are what this chapter is about.

MOST OF ALL: FIND THE RIGHT WORDS

As a lyric writer, there are plenty of fancy things you can do with words. You can play with rhyme, repetition, clever wordplay, creative imagery, all sorts of things. And if you want to do all that stuff, that's great. Good for you.

But whatever you do, there's one thing that always matters most: what those words mean. Write that on your forehead or something. It's really important.

The tricks and techniques we're about to discuss are definitely worth knowing about, but they're always secondary. A simple, honest lyric is always more powerful than one that does flashy things but doesn't quite make sense or doesn't quite say what it needs to.

To put it differently – if creativity is discovery, your number one job as a lyricist is to discover the words your song needs to say it best.

FUNDAMENTAL SONGWRITING CHALLENGE #9

Let your lyric say what it needs to say. Use as many lyrical tricks and techniques as you like, but only to support your song's message.

And with words especially, it can take a bit of work to do that discovering. Sometimes you have to say something in a way that isn't quite right before you find a way to say it exactly how you want to. Words work in subtle ways. And often, it's the little details that make all the difference.

You might write something like 'This I can't deny', which is OK but isn't quite how you'd say it in real life. So you might try 'I just can't deny', which is OK too, but is kind of a clichéd expression. So you might end up with 'No, I can't deny' instead, which might happen to fit the world of your song really well.

Or you might write something like 'Let's cheat the game', but pause to realize you don't really cheat a game: you cheat a system or you rig a game (or just play a game). So you'd want to choose whichever of those options can help you say it most clearly and accurately for your particular song.

Or you might write something like 'Check out my car' but realize 'car' is kind of an obvious word. So you might use a thesaurus to come up with 'Check out my automobile', but then put the thesaurus away because it helped you write something that sounded dated even in the 1940s. So you might come up with 'Check out my

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wheels' instead, because even though the literal meaning of all three options is the same, 'wheels' might be the perfect word in this context.

These are the kinds of decisions you get to make as a lyric writer. These are the kinds of details you get to think about if you want to create a solid, distinctive lyric. As usual, it takes effort and persistence to pull this off, but that's how great lyrics are made.

A LYRIC EXISTS LIVE

If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound? Probably. If a lyric sits on a page and nobody sings it, does it make a sound? Probably not.

A lyric really only exists in performance, whether that's a live performance or the recording of a live performance. That might sound obvious, but it's worth saying because words that look great on a page or screen don't necessarily sound great live, and vice versa.

On a page you can use punctuation to clarify what you mean. You can use chapter headings to help point out your structure. You can write long, winding sentences, because if someone doesn't understand them the first time they can go back and read them again. In a lyric you can't do any of these things. Your words have to do all the work to be clear on their own.

When we speak we also do things you don't usually do in writing. We repeat things for emphasis. We add words like 'yeah' or 'um' if they feel natural. We tend to use fewer long or complicated words in speech and we tend to speak less poetically than we write. It's up to you to notice these distinctions and be ready to use them when you write – and you can look at virtually any lyric to see how this works in practice.

KEEP IT CONVERSATIONAL

In fact, a lyric isn't just something that only exists in performance – it's something that's performed by a person. I know, that's obvious too. But it has an important consequence: your job as a lyricist is to capture how people sound when they talk.

There's an art to expressing big and interesting ideas in a way that sounds easy and conversational, and that art is what lyric writing is all about. As Aristotle said, "Think as wise men do, but speak as the common people do." Some people call this 'the poetry of the ordinary' and it's about packing a lyric with meaningful or important ideas in a way that's easy to understand.

Another part of being conversational is trying not to write anything that warps or distorts natural speech. The classic version of this is twisting a line or phrase just to make a rhyme scheme or line structure work. Like this:

To St Louis he said he'd go,
But how to get there he didn't know.

Or like this:

If there's one big problem with the human race:
We think the grass is always greener in the other place.

The first one sounds kind of poetic but it's not great writing because both lines have their natural word order messed up just to make the rhyme work. People just don't speak like that. The second one sucks even more because it misquotes a common saying to fit a rhyme. It's worth avoiding distortions like these because they make it hard to believe your lyric is being sung by a real person.

Sure, you can play around with an existing phrase to coin a new expression that sounds fresh and inventive – like you might in speech – but if you're just lazily distorting a phrase to fit a structure or rhyme scheme we'll know, I promise. We always know.

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Being conversational also means that your lyric doesn't have to read like it's an essay. I've already mentioned how you can use repetitions, slang words or pauses to make a lyric sound like speech. You can even use incomplete sentences to get your point across in a more conversational way:

Ten pm,
High heels on.
Car pulls up,
She's set 'til dawn.

It's no less clear like this, and as we're about to discuss, leaving out those extra words often also gives your ideas more impact.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Pablo Picasso said "Art is the elimination of the unnecessary." Just like you wouldn't make a machine with parts that didn't do anything, a work of art works best when everything in it pull its weight, adding something important.

This is especially true in a song lyric. In your average song you have maybe two or three hundred words to get your point across, so you don't want to waste any of them. Unless you need those extra words for some special reason, you don't say 'Is this the way to the place called Amarillo?'. You say 'Is this the way to Amarillo?'. You don't say 'I'm a person who believes deeply in love'. You say 'I'm a believer'.

The trouble is, simplicity is hard to pull off. It's often more complicated than just deleting a few unnecessary words. It's deciding which details to include or leave out. It's saying enough to be clear but not so much that it's too much information.

This is one reason drafting is so important. It let's you take a step back and figure out which ideas are important and which you might not need after all. It's normal for early drafts to come out wordy and overwritten – so one of your jobs in drafting is to cut away anything that doesn't add meaning or isn't an important part

of your writing style. Sometimes this is a leap of faith – you often have to cut good things to end up only with great things – but usually what you gain in clarity and focus makes the cutting worth it a hundred times over.

Plus, because a lyric is sung, the music underneath it tends to make what you write richer by default. So you can usually afford to underwrite a lyric more than you might expect. Phrases like ‘I don’t want to know’ or ‘Wish you were here’ might look boring on the page, but they tend to make great lyrics. Try it and see for yourself.

SPECIFICS MATTER

In a lyric, words matter. But it’s the ideas behind those words that matter most. All those different ideas are the building blocks you use to construct a lyric. Words just turn those ideas into something we can understand.

And a lyric tends to be most interesting when those ideas are specific. Just like specific choices for what your song is about matter. Just like specific choices for your song’s musical style matter.

In a lyric, this means finding specific images, details and ideas. There are as many ways of doing this as you can imagine, but they turn something bland and generic into something distinctive and really worth paying attention to.

Take this example:

I love you.

Yes I do.

I love you.

Oh yes, it’s true.

Now, it’s true that simplicity is important. But there’s usually a fine line between simple and generic or boring. So here’s one way you could liven up this example:

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I love your six-inch heels,
Your pretty auburn hair.
I love your style, I love your smile,
The sexy way you cock your head and stare.

I stuck with pretty simple images, but can you see the difference it makes? The details start to paint a definite picture. They capture your attention – and spark your imagination – in a way generic ideas don't.

Anyone can chicken out with something bland and generic. Coming up with something particular is more challenging, but specific details make your song stand its ground as something individual and distinctive.

Two common and effective ways of playing with specifics are using similes (when you say something is like something else) and metaphors (when you say something is something else). So you could say 'Baby you're a firework'. Or you could say 'You lived your life like a candle in the wind'. And yes, this conflicts with the idea that lyrics are generally conversational – in real life people don't usually tell you you're a firework – but so long as you avoid things like 'your love is like the resplendent wings of a phoenix', there's some room in a lyric to write in more heightened or poetic speech. In fact, a simple and tasteful metaphor or simile is often a great way to come up with an interesting angle or fresh hook for a song – exactly like in Katy Perry's 'Firework' or Elton John's 'Candle in the Wind'. (As always, keep a look out for your own examples too.)

DON'T ALWAYS HIT THE NAIL ON THE HEAD

Unless you're Tarzan, when you first meet someone you like you don't open with 'Hi, you're hot. Let's date.' You strike up a conversation and express how you feel in more subtle and less direct ways. You pay a compliment, you ask questions or you just flash a cheeky smile. (And if you don't, now's a great time to start.)

In Chapter 7 we looked at how great hooks don't always hit the nail on the head, but this idea applies to lyrics more generally too. Life is more interesting when you say things in more interesting ways. Plus, asking your audience to do a tiny bit of work to understand what you mean makes sure they're involved more deeply than they might be otherwise: asking them to put two and two together makes them engage with what you say much more.

So instead of 'I love you', maybe you say 'I'd cross the ocean for you' or 'I'd give my life for you' or just 'I get so emotional baby, every time I think of you'. Maybe instead of 'you're a dick' you say 'my momma don't like you and she likes everyone'. Maybe instead of 'we've been dating long enough I feel comfortable with you staying over regularly' you say 'you can leave a toothbrush at my place'.

For starters, this is a really great way of giving yourself details to write about. But there's more to it than that: these details help your lyric pack a punch because they're about what people do and not what people say. Actions speak louder than words – in lyrics as well as in real life. And talking about what real-life people do when they think or feel something is a great way of injecting the real world into your songs like we talked about in Chapter 3.

Some people call this 'show don't tell', but that doesn't mean telling is forbidden. (Telling is a kind of showing, after all.) It just means it's always good to look out for opportunities to demonstrate what you mean, and not just spell it out. It just means that showing makes the telling more compelling.

COMING UP WITH MATERIAL: LISTS AND OPPOSITES

Once you've decided what your song is about, your biggest lyrical challenge is coming up with the ideas that flesh that big idea out into an entire song.

There are lots of ways to do this. Sometimes the ideas flow from your song's situation naturally and without much effort. But sometimes the ideas come more

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slowly, in which case it's worth knowing about two powerful material-generating tricks: creating lists and finding opposites.

Here's a songwriting secret: lots of songs are just lists in disguise. Or just lists not even in disguise. Think of Lou Bega's list of lady friends in 'Mambo No. 5'. Or Alanis Morissette's list of things that aren't really ironic in 'Ironic'. Or the list of things Rick Astley promises not to do in 'Never Gonna Give You Up'.

If a lyric is built of individual ideas, one way to make sure those ideas make sense together is to make them part of a list. Then you can use that list to make up a section of your song, or even a few sections of your song.

If that takes the magic out of lyric writing for you, I apologize, but this is a really neat technique to help you move forward if you get stuck. Just come up with a list of things that are somehow related to your song's central idea. Call it 'Things I love about you' or 'Reasons I'd never leave you' or 'Things I miss about you' if you like. You probably won't give us the list heading as part of the song and you might not even use all of the ideas on the list in the song. And even if you don't end up using the list items directly, that's OK – they might help you put something else together.

Another useful technique is playing with opposites – lists of things that are different or not quite right. In Chapter 6 we looked at ways you can use an opposite or different perspective to create a bridge in a verse-chorus form or a B section in an AABA form. This is exactly the same idea at work on a more local scale.

Usually this means making a point by telling us about the things that aren't right or aren't true before telling us the thing that is. It's a way of clearing space and building anticipation for the big idea. I rewrote my 'What I love about you' example above to demonstrate:

It's not your eyes, it's not your hair.

It's not the sexy way you cock your head and stare.

It's not anything you say or do.

It's that I get to spend my life with you.

If you want to check out a great real-life example, you'll find the same technique in Cole Porter's 'Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?', which basically lists things the couple singing don't want, before rounding off with 'Cause all I want is you.'

LYRIC STRUCTURE

Creating a solid lyric structure essentially means playing with the order things go in to give them the biggest impact overall. Here are a few tricks you can use to do that.

A STRONG OPENING

Ideally, every idea in your song is a strong one. But it's especially good to open with an especially strong one.

Common techniques to grab your audience's attention from moment one include opening with something dramatic or intriguing, a question, a provocative statement or just a bold image. Here are two examples that do that:

Did you think I'd never work it out?
You thought I'd never cotton on?

She burst into the room –
Fire in her eyes.

You don't have to start every song with an earth-shattering one-liner, but it's always a good idea to think about how your opening idea draws people in. Keep your ears open to figure out how your favorite writers do this in their songs.

IMPORTANT WORDS OR LINES GO AT THE EDGES

In Chapter 7 we talked about how putting your hook at the beginning or end of your chorus (or both) gives it the most impact. Well, this is also true in general: whether

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it's the hook or not, it pays to put strong ideas at the edges of sections when you can, and save your less impressive ideas for somewhere inside.

Similarly, the words you put at the end of a line are naturally emphasized more than others – especially if they rhyme. In the same way that comedians get really good at putting the word that makes the joke zing at the end of a line, great lyricists get really good at planting the most important or significant words at the end of lines:

In any great lyric, let me tell you,
Weighty words can get lost in the middle, it's true.

Versus:

Let me tell you as a friend,
Important words go at the end.

LYRICS THAT PROGRESS OR GROW IN INTENSITY

In a lyric you get to choose what order your ideas come in. So you generally want to choose an order that progresses or grows. Just like in Chapter 8, when we talked about how a musical groove can grow and develop as a song goes on, part of crafting a great lyric structure is starting somewhere solid and taking us somewhere even more exciting as the song goes on.

One of the best ways to do this within or between sections is to put ideas into some kind of ascending order – maybe of length, complexity or emotional weight. Like this:

She's the kind of girl who'll catch your eye.
She'll take your hand and make you feel brand new.
But give her an inch and she'll steal your heart,
And then there ain't no way out for you.

I'm talking about 'catch your eye', 'take your hand' and 'steal your heart', which work well in this order because what they mean is more emotionally significant each time. There's a definite progression from seeing her for the first time to starting a relationship with her to properly falling for her.

You can even take an existing logical list and make a simple but effective progression out of that. I'm talking about songs like Craig David's 'Seven Days', where the chorus uses the days of the week to hammer home the way a relationship progresses.

A VERSE MASTERPLAN

In a verse-chorus structure, one of your biggest challenges is figuring out what to talk about in the verses. Some people call this the second verse curse – writing a solid first verse but feeling stuck on the second – but, as often, one of the best ways to stop this happening is being one step ahead. This is where a verse masterplan comes in.

Sometimes your verses just talk about different things – they go off on slightly different tangents or pursue slightly different thoughts that are somehow all related to your song's overall message. So if your song idea is 'Life is good when you belong', each verse could focus on different reasons or types of reasons why that's true: it's good to be part of a family, it's good to have friends around, it's good to live in a neighborhood you know well. Or each verse could look forward or back in time: maybe focusing on a time you didn't feel like you belonged, where you belong now or where you'd like to belong in future. Or your second verse could just be a variation of the first: it could take the same structure and shape, even keep a couple of the first verse's phrases intact, and just mix up the ideas or images it brings up.

All kinds of approaches can work – all you're looking for is some kind of organizing principle or theme to give each verse its own identity.

Sometimes, though, there's a more deliberate progression – a sense that each verse really builds on the previous one. There are at least two great ways to do this.

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One way is to use the idea of an emotional progression on a bigger scale: to let your second verse go emotionally deeper than the first, or look at something in more detail than the first. So if it's a song about someone missing someone else, maybe your first verse is about general memories but the second goes into more detail about something emotionally more important, like a weekend you spent together.

Another way is to let your verses tell chapters of a larger story, as if your choruses are interludes that separate each chapter. So your first verse could be about two people meeting for the first time, the second about what happened on the second date, and so on. Eminem and Dido's 'Stan' is a great example of this kind of verse masterplan in action.

A TWIST AT THE END

Some songs take the idea of progression even further, waiting until the end of a section or the end of the whole song to throw in a twist or final development – kind of like a Jerry Springer final thought, though less about sleeping with your cousin and more about keeping your song's structure interesting.

This was especially common in old-school AABA forms where writers would tweak a lyric in the final A section to add a kind of conclusion. So – to give you a cheesy example – 'I'm having a great day' might become 'I'm having a great day and it's all because of you' the last time.

This technique works well in verse-chorus structures too. One way of doing this is to save a twist for the end of a chorus:

She's a dangerous woman.
She'll get inside your brain.
She's a dangerous woman.
She'll steal your heart and drive you insane.
She'll fill your head with lies and rumors
And all her crazy stuff.

Yeah, she's a dangerous woman,
But I just can't get enough.

You'll see how 'But I just can't get enough' flips the whole lyric's meaning. She's not just driving this guy crazy – she's driving this guy crazy and he loves it. It's a more layered idea and much more interesting.

Another kind of twist that you sometimes see in verse-chorus structures is where the final chorus takes on a slightly different meaning from the others. I already mentioned how sometimes later choruses change a line or a word or two, but in this case we're talking about a more substantial change of meaning.

A good example is Bruno Mars's 'When I Was Your Man', which is a regret song about not treating an ex-girlfriend well. The first two choruses open with 'I should've bought you flowers' but the last talks about the new boyfriend and says 'I hope he buys you flowers'. The song goes from looking back to looking forward. It's another simple twist, but you'll see how it gives the end of the song a sense of conclusion.

So there's a handful of ideas and techniques you can use to craft a solid lyric. As usual, they're not a checklist. They're skills and tools you can use when your song calls for them.

In fact, in practice you'll often find these ideas conflicting with each other. I already mentioned how using similes and metaphors can be a great way of coming up with fresh ideas for your song but how they can also make your lyric sound less conversational. And how writing something that's simple but not dull and unspecific can be a bit of a balancing act too.

And you know what? That's exactly how it works. Mastering something as subtle and awesome as lyric writing isn't just having plenty of tools and tricks at your fingertips – it's deciding when and where to use them. It's being confident making a call on which ones to prioritize at any given time. It's knowing sometimes it's OK to sacrifice a bit of a conversational feel to make way for a great metaphor. It's

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knowing prioritizing simplicity can mean sacrificing detail and prioritizing detail can mean sacrificing simplicity. It's knowing – like we discussed in Chapter 1 – there aren't many perfect choices.

As always, the more you make these kinds of judgments the better you'll get at making them – and the more confident you'll feel about making them. But wherever you're at, if you remember the big idea we started with – to let your lyric say what it needs to say – you can't help but write something that's great.

WHAT NEXT?

Write something, anything.

Come up with ten new song ideas.

Take one of the big ideas in this book and try it out, even as just an exercise.

Take three of your favorite songs and figure out something new about how they work.

Check out some online or magazine interviews with your favorite artists.

Write your mission statement.

Enjoy the ride.

ABOUT ED

Ed Bell is a songwriter, educator and artist. He's a mix of old-school values and new-school ideas. He was born in Yorkshire in the UK, and educated at Cambridge University and The Royal College of Music in London. He mostly writes music and lyrics for theatre, and lives between Yorkshire, London and the US.

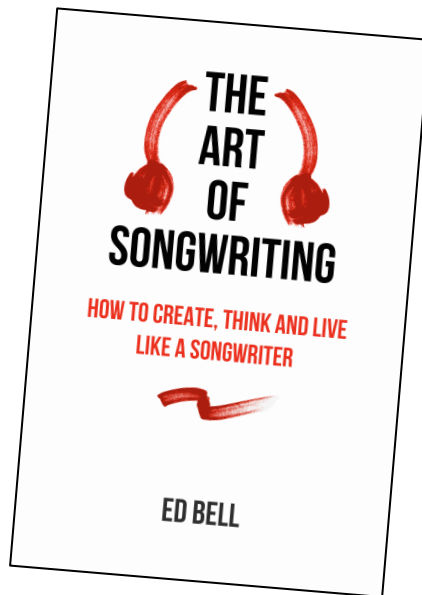


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